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SUBJECT: HUMAN TRAFFICKING MOVIE DIRECTOR TELLS STUDENTS TO
"SEEK THE TRUTH"

Classified By: Acting POL Deputy Dan Kritenbrink. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) A recent Embassy showing of "Blind Mountain," a PRC film depicting a young, college-educated Chinese woman who is trafficked for marriage to a poor farmer in rural Shaanxi Province, elicited strong reactions from a student audience. In a Q&A session afterward with the film's director Li Yang, some students criticized Li for producing a film showcasing China's failings, while others effusively praised his courage in addressing such a sensitive topic. At the same event, PolOff explained USG efforts to combat trafficking in persons (TIP) worldwide and fielded questions on China and the United States' anti-trafficking records. End Summary.

Program on Human Trafficking

¶2. (SBU) On March 19, the Embassy hosted a showing of Chinese director Li Yang's film "Blind Mountain" (Mang2 Shan1) at the Embassy's American Center for Educational Exchange for a group of 80 Chinese students from Peking University, Tsinghua University, the Foreign Affairs College and the University of Science and Technology. The film, which tells the story of a young, college-educated Chinese woman who is trafficked for marriage to a poor farmer in rural Shaanxi Province, was available in China but had not yet been shown in cinemas.

Questions and Answers with the Director

¶3. (SBU) The film's director and producer, Li Yang, joined the group after the showing for a lengthy question and answer session that touched on topics related to human trafficking, law enforcement in China, filmmaking and the responsibility of China's newly emerging global citizens. The showing also provided PolOff an opportunity to present USG efforts to combat TIP around the world and to field questions about China and the United States' anti-trafficking records as well as publication of the USG's annual TIP report.

Strong Reactions from Students

¶4. (SBU) Students' sometimes emotional comments varied widely. Some criticized the director for producing a film showcasing China's failings (especially to foreigners since the film was shown abroad but not yet in China), while others effusively praised the director's courage for addressing such a sensitive topic. Some younger undergraduate students seemed frustrated at Li Yang, and to a certain extent at the

Embassy, for showing a film that was "critical" of China to a Chinese audience. One irate woman demanded to know why such a film was being shown on what should have been, she thought, an American movie night. She asked why the Embassy had not shown instead a film highlighting American social problems. She also demanded to know why the United States had placed China on its Tier 2 Watch List TIP ranking. Another student asked why Li Yang chose to make a film on an issue he suggested was no longer a problem for China, adding that it was "embarrassing" for China to be "exposing" its problems to the world.

Graduate Students More Appreciative

¶ 15. (SBU) The reaction of older graduate students and a few anti-trafficking practitioners who attended the program was completely different. Most of them seemed impressed by the film and by Li Yang's accurate depiction of the desperation of a modern-day trafficking victim. Several stressed the need for more films like "Blind Mountain" to expose the urgent need to crack down on traffickers and their networks, as well as to vastly improve the ability of law enforcement to respond to such a scourge. Others noted that the film expertly captured the damaging effect of human trafficking on not only the trafficked individual, but also on her community, society, and country. Many older viewers agreed that human trafficking was a tragic problem in China, as well as around the world, and that action needed to be taken immediately to stem the spread of modern-day slavery everywhere.

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Director's Response

¶ 16. (C) Li Yang (protect), in answers to questions, urged those who thought his motive was to expose China's negative side to foreigners to watch the film again. As a film director, Li said he had a responsibility to shed light on problems in society so as to inspire action. He noted that, as the New York Times wrote in a March 8, 2008 article about the film, "art sometimes keeps the truth alive far better than news." The only way to make China better was to help it solve its problems and to confront its challenges head-on. Li urged students to find more avenues through art, including film, to bring social problems to the attention of Chinese citizens, so that, "unlike me tonight, when you are in front of a student audience 20 years from now, you will have a body of work to draw on to promote discussion and encourage change."

Weaknesses in China's Legal System

¶ 17. (C) The weaknesses in China's legal system and the way in which laws were poorly implemented and enforced in China drove him to produce "Blind Mountain," Li said. China had made many improvements in the last 20-30 years, but core problems depicted in the film had not yet been solved. Li noted a recent news story describing the plight of a female student from a prominent Beijing university who had been abducted and sold to a farmer much like the young woman in the movie. China still needed to progress in order to develop. Noting that he surely would have been put in jail had he produced a similar film in the 1980s, Li said his being able to create such a work today showed China had made progress and was becoming more open.

An Obligation to do Better

¶ 18. (C) Li acknowledged that when he was young, he, too, was afraid to criticize his country. Li learned, however, that after the hardship and challenges he had overcome, the only

way to move forward was to face those challenges head-on, to tell the truth and to expose reality. Li said he wasn't an idealist and believed that nothing would ever be perfect. Nonetheless, each individual had an obligation to strive to be the best they could be and to help make their country the best that it could be, Li emphasized.

Don't be Blind, Seek the Truth

¶19. (C) Li Yang ended the evening by calling on the students "not to be blind" like the villagers depicted in his film, who refused to see, or were indifferent to, the injustices in the world. As young Chinese citizens, Li urged them not to be too narrow-minded and to remember that as Chinese they had an "obligation to their motherland" to "seek the truth." Li also reminded students that, while they were Chinese, they were also citizens of the world. They therefore also had an obligation to the global community to seek justice and to combat global problems such as human trafficking, wherever it may occur.

A Series of Films

¶10. (C) "Blind Mountain," released in 2008 in the United States, was Li Yang's first feature film since the release of the critically acclaimed "Blind Shaft" (Mang2 Jing3) in 2003, which focused on corruption and fraud in China's notoriously dangerous mining industry. Primarily funded through private, overseas sources, "Blind Mountain" suffered from numerous instances of censorship by Chinese authorities -- as did "Blind Shaft" -- especially because it needed official Chinese approval to be shown at the Un Certain Regard competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007. Li Yang's original plan was to complete a trilogy of films, with a third film to be called "Blind River" (Mang2 Liu2), which was to focus on the plight of China's ever-flowing migrant population. That plan was dropped, however, when he ran up again more government censorship when he tried to begin filming during the run-up to the Beijing Olympics.

Alternate Versions

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¶11. (C) Some critics have said that to please the censorship boards, Li Yang produced several versions of "Blind Mountain," one of which was designed for an eventual video or DVD release in China. Although the "edited" ending for the Chinese release was somewhat less critical than the "international" version that was eventually released in the United States, the Chinese version of the film still concluded with a blurb on the growing problem of human trafficking in China. Although that "edited" version was apparently available for sale in China, Li Yang provided a copy of the American version for showing at the Embassy's March 19 program, which was not (yet) available in China, eliciting surprise from many audience members who had only seen the other, sanitized version.

Comment

¶12. (C) The March 19 program provided a rare opportunity for Chinese students to interact with one of China's foremost independent film directors on combating human trafficking, a subject on which China is increasingly focused. The variation in students' responses between those who criticized Li Yang for having made the film and those who praised him for addressing a sensitive issue underscores the ongoing, lively debate in China about how best to combat society's ills while keeping the country strong.

¶13. (C) Li Yang's response to some of the students' more

nationalistic comments may also reflect a generational divide over how to address China's problems. Li spent more than a decade in Europe studying film and television before returning to Beijing not long before the release of "Blind Shaft" in 2003. He represents a group of seasoned, well-traveled artists who grew up with stories of the hardships and errors of pre-reform China, especially of the Cultural Revolution, and who are returning to China after years abroad with ideas about global citizenship. Such views are clearly at odds with at least some of China's youth, including several who were in attendance at the March 19 event, who are faced with a China more open to the world but who arguably are also more sensitive to foreign criticism.

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